

## **A visit with John Heinstadt**

BY DAVID A. MITTELL, JR.

With 40 years in Duxbury, and most of them serving on many different committees, public boards and good works, John Heinstadt of Blodgett Avenue is known around town. But his life is more interesting than the slice of it that most people are aware of.

John grew up in the segregated Baltimore of the 1950s. He attended Calvert Hall – an all-boys, all-white high school run by the Catholic Archdiocese of Baltimore. The teachers were men, mostly brothers. The discipline was strong and the quality of teaching was at the level of most colleges.

In teaching personal responsibility, John recalls, there was no division of labor, no “handing off” from church to parents to neighborhood to school. All assumed responsibility and love of country abided with each. (Today Calvert Hall has a black-majority student body and remains renowned for its excellence.)

From Calvert Hall, John matriculated at Manhattan College in the Bronx, run by French Christian brothers. More excellence! Graduation 50 years ago next month with a degree in civil engineering, which was followed by a master’s degree in the same subject.

In 1968, John enlisted in the Navy Seabees, the Navy’s “Construction Battalion,” in which he served on active duty until 1972. 1969 took him to South Vietnam, where the Seabees paved Route 1, running the length of the country.

Returning from Vietnam didn’t exactly bring Ensign Heinstadt closer to home. The Seabees were charged with rebuilding Admiral Richard E. Byrd’s 1954 station at the South Pole. Extending his enlistment to qualify for the assignment, he spent the Antarctic summer from September 1971 to March 1972 turning Admiral Byrd’s Quonset hut into a Buckminster Fuller geodesic dome.

Naval service would take this young man to every continent except South America. After his return from the Pole, it was on to Davisville, Rhode Island, where he met Andrea St. Clair, a social studies teacher then working in Brighton, Massachusetts.

Andrea and John were married in 1974. In 1976, through friends, and with the help of real estate agent Chuck Walker, they purchased a \$38,500 house in Duxbury. Andrea taught in Melrose for a time before settling on a slightly shorter commute to a job as a social studies teacher at Duxbury Middle School. For 34 years, she was lovingly known by her students as the “map lady.”

John taught civil engineering at Wentworth Institute from 1974 to 2010, retiring as the school’s chief financial officer. Along the way, he got a law degree at night. In Duxbury, he was president of Duxbury Youth Baseball. At work in Dorchester, he often served as a public defender in district court.

John’s service in town government began in earnest in 1980 as a member of the Fair Housing Committee. In 1984, he led a study analyzing the functioning of town government as if it were a business. In 2002, he ran for school committee for the first time – largely out of his concern that under unwisely overzealous school policies, adolescent slips were being turned into life sentences.

Under those rules, a second incidence of a kid found in possession of marijuana could, regardless of the circumstances, result in his being expelled from school and permanently denied admission to any other high school. In some cases, Duxbury parents were surrendering custody of their children in desperate attempts to get them admitted to a school in a nearby town.

The reader inferring that John Heinstadt takes a traditional view of life and education is not mistaken. But discipline in the abstract must come with compassion, and always with Christian acts of helping others. These were the principles on which he ran for school committee in 2002. With a smile, he notes that his election was mainly due to the popularity of the “map lady.”

By the time he retired as chairman of the school committee in 2015, Duxbury had built a shining new high and middle school. He points out that because it was built on a model that can be replicated in other communities, the state’s school building authority financed 47 percent of the cost.

As he looks at today’s world John is concerned about the tendency of parents to “hand off” – to assume, for example, that if they send kids to religion education classes, priests or the clergy of other denominations will take care of everything. On the contrary, he believes, children’s wellbeing must be the responsibility of the whole community, all of the time.

The Heinstadts have three sons, ages 38, 32 and 29; granddaughters ages eight and three; and a grandson age nine. It has been a privilege to learn more about them. I hope the reader will feel the same way.